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ABSTRACT

The incidence of sexual assault among 800 randomly selected university women is examined. Four degrees of sexual assault are defined: forceable intercourse, forceable attempted intercourse, forceable petting, and forceable necking. The incidence of sexual assault, the antecedent conditions to the assault, and the type of victim-offender relationship prior to the assault are the particular foci of the research. Thirty-eight percent of respondents had been victims of sexual assault, of whom 77% reported one or more incidents of attempted intercourse or intercourse against their will. Of the offenders, 86% were previously known to the victim. Sexual assault constitutes a serious societal and mental health problem. Studies based on police reports and those restricted to rape victims only are inadequate, due to the numerous inconsistencies with the present findings. Suggestions are provided for research aimed at developing effective prevention strategies. (Author)

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Relationship between Degree of Sexual Assault, Antecent Conditions, and Victim-Offender Relationship

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Sexual assault has reached epidemic proportions in America today. Rape, one component of sexual assault, is the fastest rising serious crime in the country today, up 62% in the last five years alone. In 1973, 51,000 incidents of sexual assault were reported to the police; of these 73% were completed rapes, the remainder attempted rapes or sexual assaults. Moreove. the Federal Bureru of Investigation estimated forceable rape as one of the most under-reported crimes, in that only between one-fifth and one-twentieth are reported (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1973).

While numerous case studies and theoretical descriptions of sexual assault and assault victims have appeared in the literature, empirical research on the variables relating to all degrees of sexual assault have been sparse, with a few notable exceptions (cf. Amir, 1971; Hoyer & Galis, 1975). Studies to date have largely investigated sexual assaults that have been reported to the police, ruling out an understanding of the more under-reported types of sexual assault, such as those in which the victim is previously known to the offender. In addition, writing to date have largely been concerned with rape only, ignoring other degrees of sexual assault (cf. Hoyer & Galis, 1975). However, the problem of sexual assault is much broader: a sexual assault that does not include rape may be just as traumatizing for the woman who is the victim and no less of a societal

and mental health problem than a legally defined rape.

The present study has attempted to examine factors relating to four degrees of sexual assault, defined as: forceable necking, forceable petting, forceable attempted intercourse, and forceable intercourse. In order to better estimate the actual incidence of each degree of sexual assault and to obtain descriptions of such assaults not usually reported to the police, data were obtained from a random sample of women, rather than from files of reported victims.

In addition, three sets of variables relating to sexual assault have not been adequately investigated: antecedents of sexual assault, successful and unsuccessful attempts by women to halt an assault, and the consequences of an assault on the victim. The present study has examined these variables both in their relationship to the different degrees of assault and to the type of relationship between the victim and the offender. Given that the type of victim-offender relationship prior to the assault will affect both the degree and outcome of the sexual assault (Roehl, Byers & Eastman, 1976) such investigation is essential if sexual assault is to be understood and effective prevention strategies developed.

Method

The names and local address of 800 female undergraduate and graduate students were randomly selected from the list of students registered at West Virginia University for fall, 1976. For 66 of these students addresses were not listed and for 14 wrong addresses were listed. Thus, data from

these students could not be obtained.

A seven page, 52 item questionnaire was mailed to each of the remaining 720 students. Students were advised of the purpose of the questionnaire in a cover letter and were asked to return a completed questionnaire in the enclosed campus mail envelope regardless of whether they had been a victim of sexual assault. The questionnaire consisted of questions relating to number of sexual assaults experienced, antecedents to the assault, the nature of the assault, consequences of the assault, and relationship to the offender. Non-victims completed only the first seven items of the questionnaire.

Two hundred sixty-four (37%) of the questionnaires were returned. Of this total 99 (38%) of the respondents indicated that they had been a victim of sexual assault and completed the entire questionnaire. Three questionnaires could not be used: one victim answered each item with respect to two incidents of sexual assault and the data could not be discriminated and two questionnaires contained printing errors and thus were discarded. Respondents were primarily Caucasian (97%), and single (80%), although 14% were married. The median age of respondents was 20 years and ranged from 17-53. The percentage of respondents indicating their year in school as freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, and graduate were 29%, 15%, 20%, 16% and 18%, respectively.

Results

Due to the large scope of this study, this paper has limited itself to a discussion of those variables relating

to the victim, offender, and their relationship prior to the assault. The following data have been drawn from the 96 respondents who indicated that they had been a victim of one or more sexual assault incidents. A comparison of victims and non-victims showed no differences on age, race, marital status, or year in school.

Incidence of Sexual Assault

Respondents were asked to indicate how many times they had been a victim of each of the following sexual advances against their will: necking, petting, attempted intercourse, intercourse. Of the 96 respondents who had been a victim, 67 (70%), 76 (79%), 63 (66%), and 32 (33%), respectively, indicated that they had been a victim of each type of assault. Examining the group that reported a forceable necking incident, 49% indicated that this had occurred one or two times, while 30% reported five or more such incidents. Fifty-nine percent of women involved in a forceable petting incident reported one or two incidents, while 26% reported a frequency of five or more incidents. The majority of women who reported having been a victim of attempted intercourse or intercourse against their will had had only one such experience (57% and 59%, respectively.)

A further examination was made of the relationship between the frequency of reportings of each different degree of assault. Respondents were most likely to report the same number of incidents of forceable necking as petting, $\underline{Y}^2$ (25) = 111.52,

$p < .0001$, and subjects who reported five or more incidents of necking were less likely to report a low incidence of forceable petting. In addition, respondents who reported five or more incidents of forceable necking were more likely to also report five or more incidents of both attempted intercourse and intercourse, X^2 (25) = 56.34, $p < .001$ and X^2 (25) = 48.41, $p < .01$, respectively. Respondents who reported five or more incidents of forceable petting were more likely to report five or more incidents of attempted intercourse and intercourse, X^2 (25) = 55.28, $p < .001$ and X^2 (25) = 61.65, $p < .0001$, respectively. In addition, women who reported a high incidence of attempted intercourse were more likely to report a high incidence of intercourse against their will, X^2 (25) = 66.95, $p < .0001$.

Characteristics of the Most Serious Sexual Assault

Respondents were asked to answer the remainder of the questionnaire items with reference to the most serious incident they had reported. Of the 96 victims, 5%, 18%, 45%, and 32%, respectively, reported their most serious assault incident as necking, petting, attempted intercourse, and intercourse. The median age of the victims at the time of the assault was 17 years and ranged from 4 years to 30 years. However, 54% of the victims were between 17 and 19 years old at the time of the assault. The age of the victim was not found to be significantly related to the degree of assault.

Location. Almost half (49%) of the reported sexual assaults occurred in states other than West Virginia, while only 23% occurred in Monongalia County where West Virginia University is located. Incidents occurred in a variety of settings including the victim's home (15%), the offender's home (31%), a car (16%), outdoors (12%), a motel room (4%), and a city street (4%). Neither the location of the incident nor the setting in which it occurred were significantly different across the degrees of assault.

Characteristics of the offender. The offenders were almost exclusively Caucasian (94%) and under 40 years old (92%), with the majority (64%) in the 18-25 age range. While most of the offenders were students (57%), a substantial minority (14%) were white collar workers. Neither race nor occupation of the offender differed according to the degree of assault. However, respondents reported more younger men to be involved in the more serious offenses and older men in the less serious offenses, $\underline{X}^2$ (9) = 27.68, $\underline{p} < .01$. Most of the offenders were described as 'very attractive' (25%) or 'somewhat attractive' (52%) by their victims. It was the victims of forceable necking and petting who tended to see the offender as less attractive, $\underline{X}^2$ (12) = 23.15, $\underline{p} < .05$.

Relationship between victim and offender. Only 14% of the offenders were strangers to the victims at the time of the assault. Of the 86% of the victims who knew the offender prior to the assault, the length of acquaintance ranged from less

than a week to several years, with 68% known for a few months or longer. The relationship of offenders to victims were either distant acquaintanceships (23%), close acquaintanceships (17%), friends (5%), boyfriends (24%), former boyfriends (5%), family friends (3%) or family relatives (5%). To determine whether the type of victim-offender relationship affected the degree of sexual assault, the nine relationship variables were pooled into the following five categories: stranger, acquaintance, friend, present or former boyfriend, and relative. Relatives were found to be more likely to be involved in the less serious incidents involving forceable necking, petting or attempted intercourse, while friends and boyfriends were less likely to be involved in forceable necking and petting, $\underline{X}^2$ (12) = 23.97, $p < .05$.

Additionally, 48% of the victims had been out socially (either alone or in a group) with the offender several times and 14% only one time, while 38% did not have a dating relationship with the offender. These results did not differ across the degrees of sexual assault.

Of the victims who knew the offender well enough to have formed an opinion, 80% reported liking him prior to the incident. Respondents involved in forceable necking were more likely to report having disliked the offender, $\underline{X}^2$ (15) = 36.61, $p < .01$. At some time prior to the incident, 23% of the victims had tried to terminate their relationship with the offender. This factor also did not differ across the different degrees of assault. Additionally, 65% of the victims had had no misgivings about trusting the offender.

Again, victims of forceable necking were more likely to report not having trusted the offender, $\underline{X}^2 = 19.31$, $\underline{p} < .05$ The degree of trust was not found to be related to the length of time the victim had known the offender.

Interaction between Relationship and Assault Variables

Roehl et al (1976) have stressed that the relationship between the victim and offender is a major factor in determining the nature of the assault. Therefore, each variable was examined to determine its relationship to the type of victim-offender relationship.

Relationship was not related to the geographical location (county or state) of the assault incident, but was related to the setting in which the incident occurred, $\underline{X}^2$ (24) = 39.23, $\underline{p} < .05$. Assaults by strangers were more likely to have occurred in a city street, while assaults by boyfriends were more likely to occur in an automobile.

Offenders who were strangers to the victim were more likely to be in the 25-40 age range, while family member offenders tended to be over 40, $\underline{X}^2$ (12) = 26.59, $\underline{p} < .01$. Strangers were also more likely to be black, $\underline{X}^2$ (8) = 16.97, $\underline{p} < .05$. In addition, strangers and family members were more likely to be seen as unattractive, $\underline{X}^2$ (16) = 46.99, $\underline{p} < .0001$. No differences were found for trust or desire to terminate the relationship and the nature of the relationship.

Discussion

An earlier study by Hoyer and Galis (1975) reported an incidence of 1.7% for legally defined rape in Monongalia

County where the present study was conducted. However, the present study found more than one-third of respondents to report having been a victim of sexual assault. Even more noteably, of these women, two-thirds reported having been a victim of attempted intercourse and one-third of intercourse against their will. While a high frequency of serious sexual asaults was reported, only three of these had been reported to the police. No attempt was made in the present study to determine whether these incidents of sexual assault met the legal definition of rape for West Virginia. Yet these results indicate that any estimation of sexual assault from police reports vastly underestimate the incidence of such assaults and any prevention strategies based on data obtained from known rape victims will not take into account the largest percentage of sexual assaults.

These figures on the incidence of sexual assault must, however, be viewed with some caution since they are undoubtedly over-estimations of the actual incidence of sexual assault in the community due to a subject selection bias introduced by the non-random return of questionnaires. However, by taking the most conservative stance, that all women who had been victims of sexual assault returned questionnaires and that all women who did not return questionnaires were not victims, we can estimate that a minimum of 14% of college women feel that they have been victims of sexual assault: 10% victims of attempted intercourse and/or intercourse against their will. The percentage of women who feel themselves to have been

sexually victimized is indeed staggering. In addition, while victims of reported rapes have traditionally been of lower socio-economic class with minimal education and job skills (Amir, 1971), these results underline the fact that sexual assault is in actuality a problem for all classes of women.

Previous research has indicated figures as high as 50% of reported rapes as having occurred in the victim's home (Amir, 1971). However, results of the present study indicate that only 15% of all sexual assaults occurred in the victims's home, regardless of the degree of assault, supporting similar finding by Hoyer and Galis (1975). While few assaults occurred in city streets, a large percentage occurred in the home of the offender or in an automobile. An additional inconsistency with past research is the finding that offenders were likely to be middle class students or white collar workers, well known, well liked, and trusted by their victims. These results can best be attributed to the large percentage of assaults in which the offender was previously known to the victim. It seems likely that it is precisely these sexual assaults that have not been reported to the police, and thus not adequately investigated to date. Knowledge of these facts should be an essential component of the preventive education of potential victims.

The fact that this study was conducted with college women and that less than 40% of the questionnaires were returned suggests a need for caution in generalizing the results to

all populations. Given the numerous inconsistencies found with past research, further studies are needed which survey women in the general community as well as women in different geographic areas of the country. The present study does point to significant areas for investigation; in particular the varying degrees of sexual assault and their interaction with the victim-offender relationship. Only when in-depth empirical investigation is made which encompasses all degrees of sexual assault, legal and otherwise, will effective educational and preventive programs be possible.

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